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HERALD Magazine

Jimmy Gentry:
Baptist minister and
full-time student





Some prisoners and visitors return thanks before eating their Thanksgiving dinner. About 200 visitors and 65 inmates participated in the visitation.



A pie is checked for contraband.

Story and photos
by SCOTT ROBINSON



Inmate Bill Bruce kisses his wife Mary as she leaves. They were married a year ago in the prison chapel.

A 4-Hour Holiday

EDDYVILLE — Couples walked in the yard, holding hands, hugging and talking. A cold wind blew from nearby Lake Barkley as a light rain fell, but it didn't stop people from sitting on the brick wall that formed a bench along the picnic area. One man walked with his two little blond daughters.

around with someone's girlfriend. Now guys will kill over nothing."

Meanwhile, inmates and visitors finished off pumpkin pies and sock-it-to-me cakes. About 2 p.m., a guard shouted that visitation time was over. Slowly, people made their way to the end of the picnic shelter, poured out coolers and began saying goodbye.

The guards led visitors down the wet, wooden steps toward the rows of barbed-wire fences. Some couples were prodded along as they stopped to kiss.

The inmates were guided inside the picnic shelter as the visitors were locked outside the yard. The cold wind still blew.

The Thanksgiving holiday was over. □



Visitors leave the penitentiary.

It was amnesty day at Eddyville, a time when the prison's gates are opened to inmates' loved ones. There are several visitation days each year. Part of a four-year-old incentive program, participation generally depends on good behavior by the prisoners. But on Thanksgiving, any inmate can participate.

The steady rain had slowed to a dreary mist when the first visitor was allowed through the base of the guard tower. Visitors signed in, told guards who they were going to visit and opened their coolers and containers for inspection. Guards cut pies and cakes, checking for contraband.

By 9:30 a.m., the first visitor, a woman, had completed the hour-long checking-in process. Once the visitors were inside the massive rows of barbed-wire fences, the doors were locked behind them.

Across the large yard, the inmates began filing in, escorted in groups of five. Each of the inmates showed a guard his identification card and was searched. Gradually, they were led into the picnic area. When they all were in, the big white door was locked and the prisoners were free to be with family and friends.

Most began nibbling on their dinners immediately, consuming everything from a barrel of fried chicken to a stuffed turkey. It was a far cry from a recent prisoners' strike, when inmates were served two bologna sandwiches three times a day.

It was almost noon when inmate Bill Bruce and his wife Mary began eating. Bruce is serving without parole a life sentence he received in 1966, when he was convicted of rape. Flora Estes, a prison minister, became interested in Bruce and began looking for a woman who would visit him. She found Mary, who, after six months of prodding, agreed to visit Bruce.

She wasn't allowed to see him on her first visit in 1974. The second time, she saw him for a half hour. Her third visit was longer. She said she became convinced of Bruce's innocence and became a regular visitor.

They were married Nov. 20, 1977, in the prison chapel, and Mary is trying to get Bill a chance for parole.

After his second helping of sausage dressing and cranberry sauce, Bruce began talking about life inside the main walls.

"The value of life in there is zero," he said. "Some guys in there wouldn't think twice about killing you." He swallowed.

"Not long ago, two inmates got into an argument over a prison towel. It didn't belong to either of them, but one of the inmates picked up a piece of pipe and knocked off the back of the other guy's head," he said.

"When I got in there in 1966, if someone got killed, it was for a reason like stealing or playing

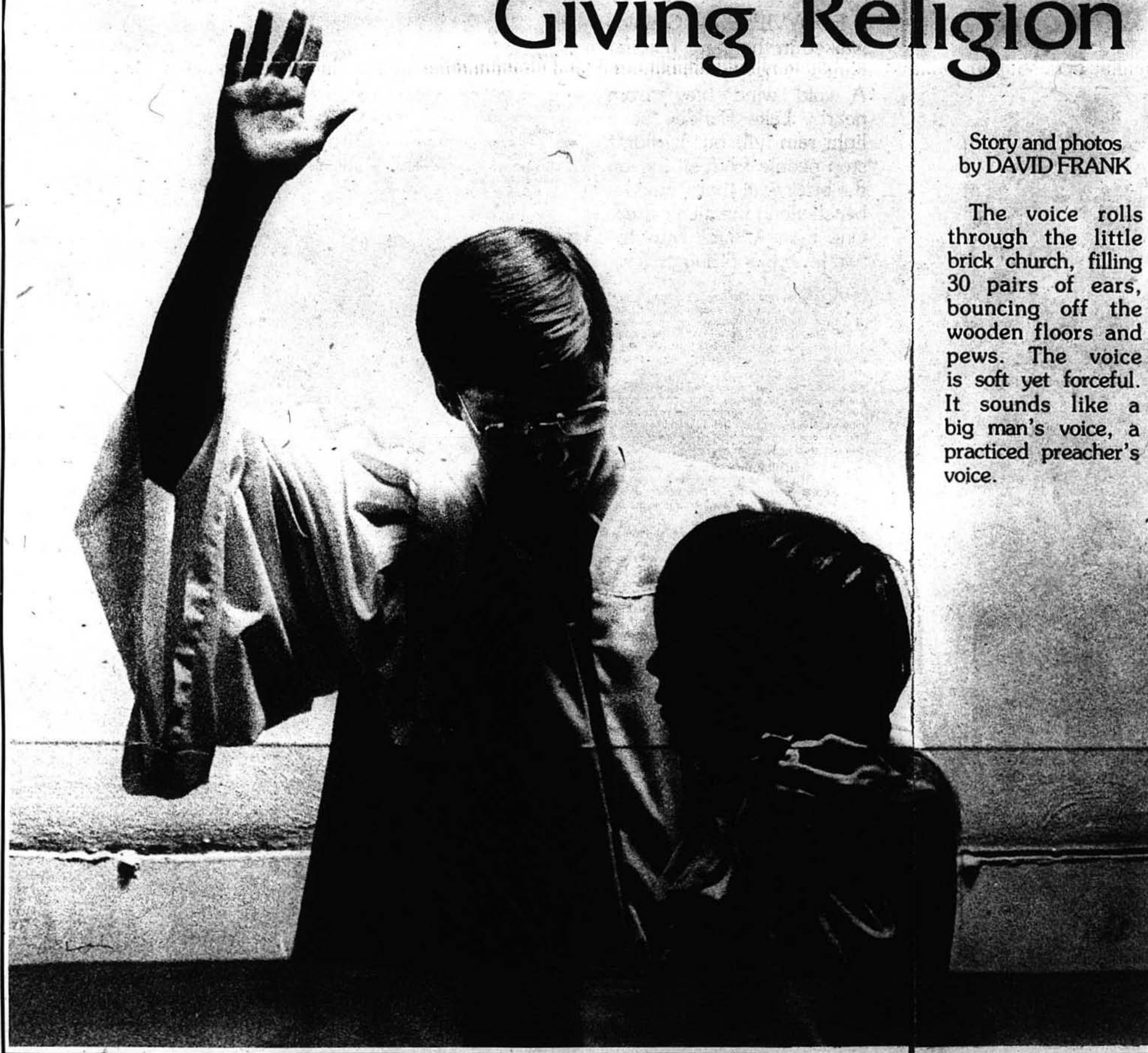


Four persons wait in the rain for the inmate they came to visit at the state penitentiary.

Giving Religion

Story and photos
by DAVID FRANK

The voice rolls through the little brick church, filling 30 pairs of ears, bouncing off the wooden floors and pews. The voice is soft yet forceful. It sounds like a big man's voice, a practiced preacher's voice.



Religion

Story and photos
by DAVID FRANK

The voice rolls through the little brick church, filling 30 pairs of ears, bouncing off the wooden floors and pews. The voice is soft yet forceful. It sounds like a big man's voice, a practiced preacher's voice.



But follow the voice to its source and one finds little Brother Jimmy Gentry, hands in flight, his train of thought at full throttle. He is telling his congregation that when he was 12 years old his father died, and God called him. Kids on the front row sit quietly, their eyes never leaving his. They're hearing preaching like they have never heard it before.

Then a baby cries and Brother Jimmy pauses for several seconds, silent. There was a time at Emmanuel Baptist Chapel when babies always cried during his sermons. But now the congregation knows what he thinks about it, and the mother scoops the child up and carries him out.

The congregation scarcely fills the 20 pews, and the little building almost seems empty. But the congregation is growing as the Sunday School attendance sign hanging behind the pulpit testifies: attendance a year ago, 21; attendance last Sunday, 43; attendance today, 54.

Jimmy Gentry has made a difference in Emmanuel Baptist Chapel, 901 West Main St., since his arrival two years ago. The Cadiz senior says he is performing a lifelong desire.

Gentry was reared in a "very beautiful Christian home" in Cadiz, and while most children his age were playing hop-scotch, house, doctor, red rover or cowboys and Indians, he was playing church.

"As a child I can remember, being by myself back in my bedroom, that I pretended we were in church and would have the songs and the prayers. And I can remember literally preaching sermons," Gentry said.

But by high school he had gotten away from preaching because he was "wanting to have a good time. I think that was what it was all about."

He played in the high school band and became a disc jockey at the local radio station, and since Cadiz is not very big, it wasn't long before his name was well known. "They know you even though they don't know you," he said.

Gentry's uncle, a Trigg County

pastor, even asked him to come and lead his church's service.

"I just talked about faith. I didn't preach. After it was over I thought I would be slick and offer an invitation for all those who wanted to become Christians to come forward," Gentry said. "I wasn't expecting anything to happen. I just did it as a formality, and five people came walking down the aisle. It really bothered me a lot; I didn't know how to interpret it."

His radio job and his membership in the high school band reflect Gentry's musical inclination. He was asked to lead the choir in his own church, and, as a result, he got back in contact with ministry. It was also a trying time, for he was a senior in high school and was going to have to make some decisions upon graduation.

"All of a sudden it became a struggle because I had thought about going into broadcast engineering, thought about going into law, and then I thought about going into teaching also. I realized that I was a senior in high school and was going to be in college next year and it was time to start finding out what I was going to do with myself."

Gentry was convinced by several friends and his minister to stay in the church. He became a supply preacher for Trigg County, which meant he would preach wherever he was needed. He had also begun taking classes at Murray State, but after one semester transferred to Western. He took a job during that summer as the youth minister at Edgewood Baptist Church in Hopkinsville.

"For the first time, I had gotten my feet wet as a minister. I knew what it was like by myself. I didn't have anybody to run to. It was just me."

When he returned to school in Bowling Green, he was approached by Dr. Rollin Burhans, pastor of the Bowling Green First Baptist Church, and Dick Bridges, associate pastor, several times in reference to a ministry available at the Emmanuel Baptist Chapel, a First Baptist mission church. In November 1976 he accepted the job.

"I knew the situation was not good

there, and I really got scared," Gentry said. "It had 38 members and it was split 38 ways and I made it split 39 ways."

At his first sermon he was confronted with about 40 faces, half of which belonged to some of his college friends who had come to encourage him.

"It was depressing that first Sunday. I wondered if I could do it," Gentry said. "Some of them wondered if they could trust a 20-year-old pastor."

For the first four months, Gentry was consistently getting only about 15 people. Twice he got 11, and he was at the point of quitting. He cried when he told Dr. Burhans about it, but the older pastor gave him a pep-talk that bolstered Gentry's confidence. The church's atmosphere improved. There still were small numbers, but his work became more enjoyable and the numbers no longer bothered him.

"Preaching gives me a sense of personal satisfaction, but during the two years as a pastor I have discovered there are two things you've just got to do—prepare two sermons a week—and sometimes it becomes a burden. I just don't have time to write the sermons being a full-time student," Gentry said.

But he gets help from volunteers, including two Western students: Tommy Katzman, the music minister and a Bowling Green senior; and organist Sherry Gardner, a Louisville junior and Gentry's girl friend.

"Youth is what Emmanuel needs. They need somebody who's excited, somebody that's fired up, somebody who really believes in what they're doing and I believe in what I'm doing."

"Some of the things that I do with those people make them think that I am just a little bitty kid, but then there are times that they look at me as a respectable adult."

"Jimmy is awful good, but I think years will do him better," admitted Sidney Gregory, a member of Emanuel since its establishment in 1955. "He's an awfully good mixer, never sees a stranger."

Gentry prides himself with visiting people who can't get to church, and he hopes his congregation will pick up his

Gentry baptizes Dale Kessinger.

ways.

"The goal I want to see is for Emmanuel people to walk up to somebody and in a tactful way—and I don't mean just come out and say, 'Are ye saved?', 'Are ye going to hell?'—but in a genuine, tactful way, be able to say to someone 'What's the Lord doing in your life? I want to share with you what he's doing in my life.' I really think that Christ expects all

Christians to witness, but I believe he expects us to use tact in doing it." Jimmy will graduate in May, and he plans to enroll in Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. But he said he hopes he will be able to return on the weekends to continue his ministry at Emmanuel.

"Things are just now happening at Emmanuel. I don't feel I need to leave yet." □



Gentry discusses Noah and the flood in his Sunday school class, which is for ages 12 to 20.



Gentry prays with 91-year-old Era Johnson.



Penny Lake professes her faith to Gentry before being baptized while Music Minister Tommy Katzman watches from the altar.



After the service, Gentry talks with Earl Smith, 5.

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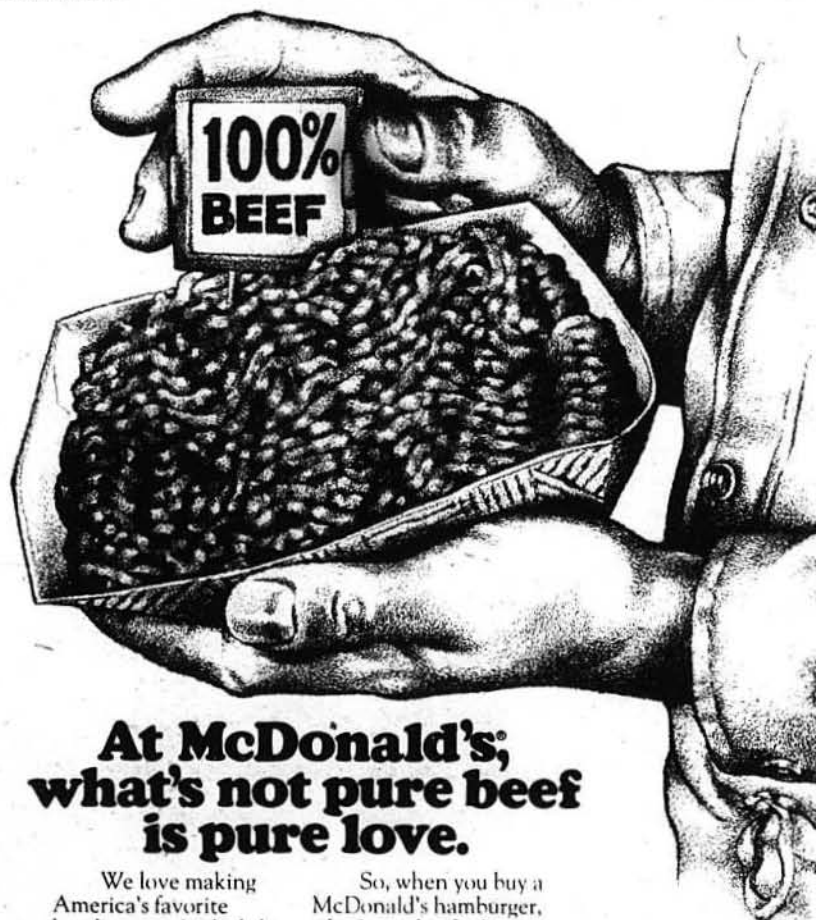
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